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Nebraska to Receive New Funding for Water Conservation in Republican River Basin

(Lincoln, Neb.) Gov. Dave Heineman was notified by federal officials this week that Nebraska will receive nearly \$800,000 in funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The federal funding will be used to support the state's ongoing water conservation efforts in the Republican River basin.

The new NRCS funding will be combined with \$900,000 in state and local funds set aside to offer irrigators in the basin an opportunity to permanently retire irrigated acres for water conservation purposes.

"I want to thank Nebraska's congressional delegation for working with us to address a very critical need, and I am particularly grateful for the involvement of our two U.S. Senators and Congressman Tom Osborne," Gov. Heineman said. "Our state does best when we work together as a team, and because of our willingness to do so, we will be able to offer farmers a much-needed alternative in a region deeply affected by drought."

The Nebraska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in collaboration with NRCS and the Upper, Middle and Lower Republican Natural Resources Districts (NRD) will provide farmers and landowners in the basin with nearly \$1.7 million in Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding for water conservation. DNR will contribute \$600,000 in funding for the partnership with the NRDs contributing \$100,000 each.

Through EQIP, NRCS pays irrigators a \$100 per acre payment for three years in return for filing a permanent easement that rescinds irrigation rights on targeted acres. The combined state and local funding offered by NRDs will provide an additional one-time payment of \$375 per acre of land enrolled in EQIP, bringing the total payment to \$675 per acre.

The goal of the partnership is to enroll at least 2,400 acres, with the potential to save an estimated 2,600 acre-feet of water per year. An acre-foot is defined by the amount of water needed to cover one acre of land in 12 inches of water.

NRCS State Conservationist Steve Chick said, "This is a special initiative and, at this point, a one-time offer to irrigation farmers."

Future funding will depend on available budget dollars. We were able to request EQIP funds that were made available from other states."

NRCS expects to begin the application process this month, and will announce details in the coming weeks. Under the contracts, landowners will maintain ownership of any EQIP land and will retain the right to dry land farm or return the property to grassland. The easement is permanent and remains in effect following any sale of EQIP lands. Additional funding may also be contributed by the Tri-Basin NRD, but has not been finalized.

Acting DNR Director Ann Bleed said, "These funds will target irrigated acres along the Republican River and its tributaries. This is another option for farmers to use and reduce groundwater usage in the Republican Basin, and it compliments the current Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) still being offered."

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